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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [KISL](#) [SA](#)

SUBJECT: SAUDI OPPOSITION GROUP REACTIVATED IN PUBLIC SPHERE

REF: A. 06 RIYADH 6372
[B.](#) 06 RIYADH 6472
[C.](#) 06 RIYADH 8723
[D.](#) 06 RIYADH 6925

Classified By: Acting Deputy Chief of Mission David Rundell
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[¶](#)11. (S) SUMMARY: The London-based Saudi opposition group Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia (MIRA) began another unsuccessful public call on March 22 for protests in local mosques in Riyadh and Jeddah. The last time that MIRA called for protests was in August 2006 during the Lebanon crisis. Those efforts were unsuccessful (Ref A and B). MIRA issued four near-consecutive public statements in the week leading up to the proposed March 30 protest date. In addition to its usual claim of corruption against the SAG, MIRA leader Dr. Sa'ad al-Faqih also criticized the government for its "servitude" to the United States. As in the past, Al-Faqih targeted tribal loyalties, calling on tribal sheiks and leaders from the Shammar tribe to protest. However, he employed fellow exiled oppositionist Talal al-Rashid to lead the call for the tribal support. Despite limited attendance at the March protests, al-Faqih issued a series of public statements in April on MIRA's London-based television channel Al-Islah, calling for further protests and contradicting claims that MIRA is a weak organization. Although it appears that these renewed broadcasts do not enjoy any groundswell of domestic support, they are likely indicative of a renewed source of funding. END SUMMARY.

Opposition Group Renews Calls for Tribal Support

[¶](#)12. (S) The London-based Saudi opposition group Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia (MIRA) began another unsuccessful public call on March 22 for protests in local mosques in Riyadh and Jeddah via its London-based satellite television channel Al-Islah. The protests were to be held on March 30 during Friday prayers at designated mosques. Because the SAG cannot ban mosque gatherings, MIRA leader Sa'ad al-Faqih declared that it could not stop these protests. This call for protests was MIRA's largest public comeback since August 2006, when it called for similar protests, though al-Faqih has regularly broadcast anti-Saudi rhetoric on Al-Islah.
(NOTE: The most recent statements of interest include the October 2006 statement criticizing the formation of the Allegiance Commission and the new succession law, and January 2007 statements: one criticizing the Saudi response to Sadaam Hussein's execution, and the second criticizing claims of corruption surrounding the Eurofighter deal (Ref C). END NOTE.)

[¶](#)13. (S) In his initial 90-minute broadcast, al-Faqih aired a six-minute message by Talal al-Rashid of the Shammar tribe, in which he urged his tribal members to support MIRA and prepare for the "coming change" in Saudi Arabia. Al-Faqih

focused the broadcast on this message and provided a telephone number where listeners could call al-Rashid to express their support for MIRA. (NOTE: Talal al-Rashid is also an oppositionist in exile. In August 2006 he announced the formation of the "Saudi Democratic Opposition Front" from Paris. While this announcement appeared in foreign press--namely the Arabic-language newspaper Quds al-Arabi noted for its anti-Saudi stance-- there was no public announcement or visible support inside the Kingdom (REF D). END NOTE.) Al-Faqih continued with his usual criticisms of the SAG--corruption and the lack of accountability and transparency--specifically criticizing the King's failure to reshuffle the cabinet as had been expected. Additionally, for the first time, al-Faqih criticized the SAG for its "servitude" to the United States, commenting that it is one of the few issues that binds the entire Al Saud family together.

¶4. (U) In three subsequent broadcasts leading up to the March 30 protest date-- each ranging from two to two and a half hours, al-Faqih reiterated his call for protests at designated mosques in Riyadh and Jeddah. He urged his followers to withstand pressure from the SAG and not fear potential repercussions. He repeatedly praised the Shammar tribe for its support and criticized the SAG for pressuring the family of key Shammar tribe members so as to hinder their continued public support for MIRA. Al-Faqih also specified what he claims is the greatest weakness of the SAG--inadequacy of the security forces and infrastructure -- and proposed measures to correct this.

¶5. (S) The March 2007 call for protests was similar to past attempts, such as the December 16, 2004 call that was preempted by Saudi riot police, to use tribal affiliations to gain domestic support, as well as the frequency and type of information released. The 2006 call appealed to the Kingdom's conservative religious community, urging it to band together at mosques and pray regularly in mass gatherings. The 2006 statements focused more on the location and timing of the protests-- the 44 mosques were repeatedly named and early arrival was identified as instrumental in the protests' success. Additionally, the statements that were often issued on MIRA's website or radio station were short in duration and featured only al-Faqih. The 2007 call for protests took a different approach, mirroring MIRA's 2004 efforts-- both the 2004 and 2007 statements targeted tribal affiliates and leaders and even named several supporters. Additionally, the specifics of the mosque locations and timing were not highlighted, as they were in 2006. Rather, 2007 statements were substantive, focusing on tribal allegiance, criticisms of the SAG, and other policy issues. The protest calls that were broadcast on television featured alleged signed statements from resident Saudi tribal leaders and employed viewer support as a means to demonstrate MIRA's increasing strength and a growing following.

Television Broadcasts Continue Despite Protest Failures

¶6. (U) The March 30 protests were poorly attended and were not reported in any media or on any Saudi-based website. Despite this failure at public engagement, al-Faqih continued to broadcast messages on Al-Islah. The statements in April were more fervent, of greater frequency, and more defensive than those in March. He even cited the satellite company that hosts the television channel in Saudi Arabia and commented on its temporary closure in the southern region of the country. Al-Faqih continued to defend MIRA's policies and goals, maintaining even in the wake of criticism for the failed protests that MIRA is strong. Additionally, he contradicted March's statements by dedicating an entire broadcast on April 18 to the regional and tribal neutrality of MIRA, ignoring his previous pleas for the Shammar tribe's support. (NOTE: In December 2004, al-Faqih continued broadcasting for several months after the Saudi government prevented the attempted protests; he even attempted to organize smaller protests, albeit unsuccessfully, before he went quiet again. END NOTE.)

Background of the Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia

¶7. (C) The head of MIRA, Dr. Sa'ad al-Faqih, is a Saudi dissident and physician living in exile in London. He was one of the signatories of the 1992 "Memorandum of Advice" submitted to the late King Fahd, and he was jailed immediately following the memorandum's public release. He is a bin Laden supporter, who in past interviews has referred to bin Laden as part of a new "social structure" that opposes America, as well as Arab and Muslim regimes allied with America. During his time in London, he formed IRA, which called for Islamic reform in Saudi Arabia and the removal of the Al Saud family. He opened radio, television, and internet sites to promote his cause. According to media reports, al-Faqih has posted al-Qaeda messages on MIRA's website, and in 2001, assumed the role of al-Qaeda spokesperson in London following the arrest of Egyptian Islamic Jihad terrorist Yassir al-Sirri.

¶8. (C) MIRA was designated by both the United Kingdom and United States as having alleged links to al-Qaeda. On December 24, 2004, under United Nations Order 2001, the Bank of England froze MIRA's assets because the Treasury had "reasonable grounds for suspecting that the organization is acting on behalf of Sa'ad al-Faqih, who was listed by the U.N. as an associate of al-Qaeda on December 23." Similarly, on July 14, 2005, the U.S. Department of Treasury designated MIRA for providing support to al-Qaeda, based upon the designation of al-Faqih.

¶9. (S) COMMENT: Al-Faqih's forceful return to the television airwaves with lengthy and numerous broadcasts after months of intermittent broadcasts potentially indicates a renewed availability of resources and, possibly, though less likely, a membership surge. Although the source of funding and range of broadcasting is a key issue, it might simply be, as it was in 2004, a means to remain in the spotlight a bit longer. However, more important is al-Faqih's play on the tribal and religious establishments. Al-Faqih's loyalties have floundered between these two areas, and in less than one year he completely flipped again. Last time, his appeal to the religious establishment was the primary concern; now it appears to be obtaining a tribal following. However, the use of al-Rashid for supposed tribal support calls into question whether he is really hoping to gain tribal loyalties or if these two opposition leaders are attempting to join forces to gain a domestic following in opposition to the SAG. Although al-Faqih has clearly demonstrated his personal staying power, there is no measured evidence of domestic support, and his inability to target a consistent audience brings into question the depth and nature of his support. END COMMENT.
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